

Caught in Israel's Crossfire

Messianic congregations in the Holy Land are growing despite continued terrorism and religious persecution.

In the aftermath of the terror attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., a year ago this month, churches throughout the United States filled with grieving, despairing people. Reports of large numbers of people responding to altar calls encouraged many Christians to hope that in the wake of terror and death new life might spring forth.

However, according to a Barna Research Group study in November, only two months later, church attendance appeared to be back at normal levels. "Churches succeeded at putting on a friendly face but failed at motivating the vast majority of spiritual explorers to connect with Christ in a more intimate or intense manner," George Barna concluded.

In Israel, however, amid ongoing and recently escalating acts of terrorism, the body of Messianic believers (Jews who believe in Jesus as the Messiah) is growing. As secular Israelis grow increasingly frustrated with the violence and apparent failure of the political peace process, Messianic congregations are reaching out to those who are seeking some meaning in life amid all the unrest.

Behind tragic images of Israeli tanks invading areas governed by the Palestinian Authority, the bloody victims of suicide bombings being carried into ambulances, and young Palestinian boys in terrorist fatigues clasping automatic weapons, God is quietly cracking open the window of heaven over His land.

A Time for Questions

Robert Stearns, executive director of Eagles' Wings ministries, a Christian organization that has been supportive of Israel for the last 10 years, sees Israel as God's

“timepiece” for the nations. He believes that by closely watching what is happening with the Jewish people we can discern “what time it is in the Spirit.”

Avi Mizrachi, pastor of Adonai Roi Messianic congregation in Tel Aviv, says the Israeli people are “hungry.”

“They are searching for peace,” he says. “All of man’s efforts for peace have come to nothing, but we know that true peace comes only through the Prince of Peace, Yeshua [Jesus]. God has spoken to us as pastors that we have the responsibility to raise up leadership, to prepare for harvest and to believe for finances needed for the harvest.”

Mizrachi, a Tel Aviv native and 1986 graduate of Christ for the Nations Bible Institute in Dallas, reluctantly started his congregation in 1996 at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. He was an evangelist, and as the head of the Israeli National Evangelism Committee he worked with pastors, but he had no desire to become one.

To obey God he started Adonai Roi (“The Lord Is My Shepherd”) with a handful of believers, and today about a hundred sabras—Jews born in Israel—and Jewish immigrants from all over the world meet every Saturday for a lively Shabbat service.

By October 2001 Adonai Roi had relocated, seeking larger accommodations. The need for more space is not rare among Israel’s Messianic congregations these days.

“Almost every congregation is experiencing so much growth that they don’t have enough seats,” Mizrachi points out.

Branching out last year from its current location in the center of Tel Aviv, right next to one of the largest areas of New Age and adult businesses, Adonai Roi planted a new congregation on the south side of the city. “People watch terrible news about what is going on here, but I’m encouraged,” Mizrachi says.

The numbers seem to support his optimism. There were an estimated 250 Messianic Jews in Israel in 1967. Today there are about 7,000, by some estimates.

There are 120 multinational evangelical congregations nationwide that comprise Israeli members—about 65 are Hebrew-speaking fellowships, some 50 are Arabic-speaking, and a handful are Russian-speaking. One of the largest of the Messianic congregations is Beit Immanuel Congregation in Jaffa, led by David Lazarus.

“The conflict in the region is opening people’s hearts to the Lord,” Lazarus says. “The past few months we have seen young people coming to faith almost every week.”

Beit Immanuel directs new believers into one of 16 home groups, where they are discipled. These groups also evangelize. A major effort last year by the home groups was an outreach to 50,000 homes in Tel Aviv and Jaffa using the Jesus video. Many Russian Jews, especially, have come to faith.

“They are a blessing,” Lazarus says. “They are not afraid to evangelize in the face of persecution.”

Toini Suopellonmaki of Finland says that “Israelis are searching and asking a lot of questions now.” She has worked in Israel for more than 10 years and believes “it is God’s time.”

Her ministry is based in an architecturally historic Lutheran church in Jaffa. Because the beautiful building attracts many curious people, the staff attempts to meet their visitors’ spiritual hunger, a fact that has prompted them to nickname their outreach “inreach.”

Other Messianic ministries working with the poor, with youth, with Jewish immigrants and with members of the Israeli military are reporting increased interest as well. The same trend is evident among the Jewish people worldwide. Globally

there were only a handful of Messianic believers before the 1970s. Today there are approximately 350,000.

Stearns sees parallels between the history of modern Israel and the history of the church during the last hundred years. As an example, he cites the beginning of the Zionist movement (to recreate the nation of Israel) in 1897, noting how it coincided with the birth of modern Pentecostalism in the church in the early 1900s.

“There is a definite link between the children of covenant—God’s covenant people, Israel, and God’s covenant people, the church,” he states.

According to world missions resource Operation World, there are about 115,000 Christians in Israel, who make up percent of the population of some 6 million. Of these, about 80 percent are Arab Christians, mostly Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox; 15 percent are expatriates; and 5 percent are of Jewish background. <P> **A Time for Answers**

A part of Adonai Roi’s growth is a result of the Dugit Messianic Outreach Center, founded by Mizrachi in 1993. Dugit (Hebrew for “a little fishing boat”), right in the center of bustling Tel Aviv, is a home base for outreach where believers from a variety of congregations and teams from all over the world work together to reach Israelis. Thousands have heard the gospel as a result of visiting the center or by seeing a drama or worship presentation hosted there.

Three years ago “George,” a Russian immigrant and alcoholic, watched a King’s Kids group dance on the street. Their innocent joy touched his heart, and he accepted an invitation to visit Dugit.

Within half an hour, he prayed for Jesus to be his Savior. Five days later he returned saying he had felt the power of God like electricity go through his body for those five days. He was freed from 15 years of alcoholism.

He then wrote a letter to his daughter in Russia explaining what had happened. As a result, she gave her life to Jesus and in turn shared the gospel with her grandmother, who also became a believer.

Tel Aviv, on the Mediterranean, is the largest city in Israel. Nicknamed "the city that never stops," it is the national center of commerce, entertainment and nightlife. Jerusalem is the religious and political hub, but Tel Aviv is very secular.

"When we talk to people on the street, we see that people are seeking. We don't even have to use tracts when we do evangelism. People approach us. We see that the harvest is ripe, but we don't have enough workers," Mizrachi claims.

He sees Tel Aviv and the adjacent Jaffa as the entry point for revival. Jaffa, with its working harbor, has been a port of entry to and from the country for centuries. Biblically it is mentioned in stories relating to Jonah and Peter.

"We have been praying for revival, and there have been prophecies about it. I really believe that revival is coming to Israel and specifically to Tel Aviv," Mizrachi says.

Even though the religious Jewish establishment does not approve of evangelism, the believers of Dugit do not hold back. Their courage to spread the gospel has not been without a cost. The ultra-Orthodox Jewish "anti-missionaries" started to harass the ministry three years ago.

"My life has been threatened," Mizrachi says. "They have threatened to burn our building many times. We have been called Nazis, and they have painted swastikas on our walls."

The harassment during street outreaches, however, makes so much noise that people want to know what the commotion is about. "God is using even that—and we see miracles happening," Mizrachi adds.

Crafting Unity

Because Israel's Messianic community is young—though they have greatly matured from 20 years ago when noncharismatic and charismatic pastors refused to talk with one another—living in unity remains a challenge. Still, Messianic congregations share a common sense of identity and destiny, serving the same purpose of reaching Israelis. As a result, leaders are making real efforts to stay connected.

For two years, pastors in Tel Aviv have met together to pray. When Mizrachi first got the idea from the Lord, he thought it was impossible. To his surprise, 50 pastors came—some from congregations he didn't know existed. He discovered that in addition to the 10 or so Hebrew, Russian, Ethiopian and Arab local congregations, there were about 50 African, Spanish, Filipino, Chinese and Romanian expatriate churches in Tel Aviv alone.

A year after they first came together, they hosted the first all-night prayer meeting in Tel Aviv. It was held on Sept. 30, 2000—the day when the current Palestinian El Aksa Intifada ("The Dome of the Rock" uprising) began. Today these Tel Aviv leaders pray together monthly.

Another deliberate effort to build unity among the Messianic leaders is a movement called Men Meeting With God. Twice a year men gather in the Negev Desert with no agenda, just to listen to God and then share with and encourage one another. As a result of this year's meeting, the 45 leaders present were prompted to send a letter of support to the Israeli government.

"The amazing thing was that we all agreed on the script," says Mizrachi, who is part of the movement's planning committee. This open letter was published in a national Hebrew newspaper in April. The 45 also unanimously submitted an appeal to Western Christians to support Israel and the Jewish people

during the current period of heightened tension between Jews and Palestinians.

Last spring, the meeting schedule at Adonai Roi was adjusted because of a Passover conference that turned out to be historic because it became the largest gathering of national believers in modern Israeli history. Approximately 1,500 believers from Arabic, Jewish and Russian backgrounds gathered to pray and worship together.

Members of Adonai Roi normally meet for their Shabbat service on Saturday evening and finish at about 9 o'clock. On the way home, many walk a few blocks to catch a bus, and some stop by a popular local coffee shop.

That particular Saturday—March 30—just when Adonai Roi's meeting would have been letting out, a Palestinian bomber walked into the coffee shop and blew himself up, wounding more than 30. Most likely, if Adonai Roi had held its regularly scheduled service, some from the congregation would have been in the blast area and harmed.

There are other stories of divine protection. One believer was leaving the Jerusalem Market when she remembered that she had forgotten to buy something and started to return. She sensed God nudging her not to go back. A few moments later the market was ravaged by a suicide attack.

Mizrachi says Adonai Roi has experienced grief as well.

In April, a young Israeli soldier stopped a suspicious-looking car at a checkpoint in east Jerusalem. As he approached the car, its terrorist passengers, realizing they had been discovered, detonated their explosives killing themselves and the soldier. About a year earlier, the young man had come to Dugit asking many questions about God. He had accepted Jesus as his Messiah and joined the congregation. <P > **Needed:**

Prayer and Action

Robert Stearns, who is very involved in encouraging Christians to support Israel, is now heading a unique prayer collaboration between the Israeli consulate and Christian organizations in New York City. He sees evidence that God is starting to turn the heart of Israel to the Gentiles. In like manner, he reminds Christians that in Isaiah 40 God calls His people to comfort Israel.

"The Bible says that in the last days God will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and of children to the fathers," he says. "I definitely think that Israel is the father of the church. What is happening now is that our hearts as the church are being turned to the fathers of our faith, Israel."

The current conflict in the Middle East can be seen as a war between two houses of prayer, he believes. "There is the house of prayer of the Jews, which is at war with the house of prayer of Islam. The battle right now is over who will be worshiped on the Temple Mount. It's not a political or economic battle."

The religious and sociopolitical conditions in the Middle East are complex and can be extremely confusing. Stearns suggests that American Christians read broadly to understand the issues.

The Internet provides information on both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides. Sources for informed intercession include , , and . Books and e-mail prayer lists also are resources.

Mizrachi encourages Christians to continue coming to Israel to build relationships with the Messianic church. It would be easy, he says, to release many of the country's Messianic believers into full-time ministry with financial gifts channeled through the local congregations.

Says Stearns: "If every American Christian would pray for the peace of Jerusalem every day, this would start a chain

reaction that would raise our awareness on the issues regarding Israel.”

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Clash With the Quran

While Islamic violence is threatening the world, Arab and Israeli believers are discovering unity.

The young Arab man crossed the street, leaving the mosque and walking up to a discotheque in Tel Aviv. It was Friday evening, and the sun was setting over the Mediterranean as hundreds of teenagers waited in line for a school party to begin at the disco.

The Arab man detonated himself, killing 21 girls. Nail-packed explosives had been strapped to his body. One of the girls was from pastor David Lazarus’ congregation.

Terrorism touches everyone in Israel. That perhaps is why the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in America touched Israelis so deeply. They donated blood and named streets after New York City and the Pentagon. The attacks also raised their hopes that the world finally would understand Israel, where the constant threat of Islamic terrorism has been part of daily life for the last 50 years.

In the 1990s, many in Israel had high hopes for the peace process embraced by the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat. Today they believe they have tried everything with Arafat, who seems neither willing nor able to rein in terrorism. Israelis are frustrated, angry and mentally preparing for war.

There is no confusion in Israel about whether or not Islam is a peaceful religion. Lazarus, for example, points out that Islam is involved in most of the world's major conflicts—from Indonesia to the Philippines to Sudan to Afghanistan to Nigeria.

Messianic pastor Avi Mizrachi believes the primary issue is “the Islamic evil spirit that is working behind those people who are calling for jihad, a Muslim holy war, which means to ‘purify the world from Zionist Jews and immoral Christians.’”

He says that if the demonic spirit behind Islam is dealt with, then the issues will become clearer: “I believe with all my heart that one day, like the wall of communism came down, we will see the wall of Islam come down. [Since 9/11] God is shaking the Western world to realize that they have been sleeping, as far as Islamic revolution goes.”

Lazarus believes God is going to dismantle Islam from the inside out. For more than 10 years, Messianic leaders from Israel have met secretly with Christian leaders from the surrounding Arab countries to encourage one another and pray.

“Many wonderful things are happening in the Arab countries already,” Lazarus notes. He says the current Middle Eastern conflict tests the foundation of their harmony but that at this year's meeting in the spring there was tremendous unity.

Lazarus and Mizrachi both have a good relationship with “Pastor Victor,” who leads an Arabic congregation in Jaffa. Last year Mizrachi ministered with “Pastor Nizar,” an Arab, in Northern Ireland.

The body of believers in Israel is in a maturing process. Lazarus believes that God will use Jewish and Arab believers together to take the gospel to the Arab world. He adds: “We have already started to strategize for that.”

A Different Kind of Synagogue

An American who grew up in a traditional Jewish home in Boston leads one of the largest Messianic congregations in Israel.

David Lazarus grew up in a traditional Jewish family in Boston. When he was 19, he traveled to Israel to find out what it meant to be Jewish.

His quest for deeper purpose led him to live by himself in the Sinai Desert in a hut by the Red Sea for 2-1/2 years. One day when he hiked the 5 kilometers to the nearest water faucet, some Christians gave him food and a Bible. It was the first time he had seen a New Testament.

"I was taken by the words of Jesus. I never expected His teachings to be so profound," Lazarus explained. "When I read Isaiah 53, it looked like it was talking about Jesus. But because it was a Christian Bible, I said, 'This can't be what the Hebrew Scriptures really say.'"

He went to Jerusalem to read the Dead Sea Scrolls for himself and found that Isaiah 53 was written precisely the same way in the ancient text as it was in the Christian Bible—word for word. "It began shaking up my heart and understanding," he said. "How could it be that Jesus was the Messiah and we didn't know it, never even heard about it?"

Lazarus began to see the sin in his heart and prayed to God.

"If I could be forgiven by the sacrifice of Jesus, I would accept that, even if it was very difficult for me to believe in Jesus."

Lazarus had inherited a deep fear and animosity toward Christians who represented this Jesus—Christians who had persecuted Jews and kicked his ancestors out of Spain some 500 years ago. "Yet I knew from that moment, that the rest of my life I would tell the Jews about Jesus."

That was in 1979. The next year, the Sinai Desert was given to

Egypt, and Lazarus moved to Tel Aviv. He thought he was the only Jewish believer in Israel but soon found Beit Immanuel Congregation. There he met his wife, Michaela, and was discipled.

Fifteen years ago, he was asked to be the pastor, and he became the first Hebrew-speaking leader of Beit Immanuel. Since then, the congregation has experienced great growth and with its 250 members is now one of the largest Messianic congregations in Israel.

Young adults in their 20s make up 70 percent of Beit Immanuel's congregation. The youthful energy makes the Shabbat meetings on Friday evenings hop. Lazarus believes that in the next 10 years the single major challenge facing the congregation will be to disciple the young men and women to become leaders.

"I have given myself to raising up young people," Lazarus says. "If they can be radical believers for Jesus, the kingdom of God will grow."